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College Enrollment Set Record in 2008

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Almost 40 percent of the nation's 18- to 24-year-olds in 2008 were enrolled in college, a record number, according to a [Pew Research Center report](#) released on Thursday.

The rise was driven almost entirely by a surge in students attending [community colleges](#).

"We have anecdotally got this sense that there's been this college enrollment boom," said Richard Fry, a senior research associate at the Pew center who wrote the report, "but now we've got confirmation, and we know that at least among young adults, the increase seems to be a two-year college phenomenon."

"What's behind this," Mr. Fry added, "is that we have the biggest pool of young adults we've ever had who've finished high school."

The previous record for college enrollment among 18- to 24-year-olds was 38.9 percent in 2005.

The new report, using data from the [Census Bureau's Current Population Survey](#), found that a record 84.9 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds had completed high school as of October 2008, up a full percentage point from the previous year.

The percentage of high school dropouts, meanwhile, has been declining. In October 2008, 9.3 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds had dropped out of school, compared with 10.2 percent in 2007.

"The high school completion numbers are somewhat startling, since they fly in the face of the very negative impression people have gotten about dropouts," Mr. Fry said.

Although solid numbers for this year's college enrollment are not yet available, the Pew report said that early estimates in the Census Bureau's September 2009 Current Population Survey hinted that the record 2008 number might be surpassed.

The census data on which the report is based has, however, an optimistic skew. Because it includes only the noninstitutionalized civilian population, and since prisoners are especially likely to be high school dropouts, the overall dropout rates among Americans 18 to 24 are probably higher than reported, and college enrollment rates somewhat lower.

The Census Bureau is expected to release its own analysis of the October 2008 college enrollment data next week.

With the recession, which officially began in December 2007, the young adults' steepest drop was in employment. Only 50.4 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds were employed in October 2008, compared with 52.7 percent in 2007.

While the year-to-year changes are not huge, the longer-term trends show significant shifts. In 1973, only 24 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college, only 80.7 had completed high school, and 15.7 had dropped out of high school.

Enrollment has been rising at two- and four-year colleges alike for decades. And most young adults still prefer four-year colleges, even though they are more expensive.

But the increase in the rate of students going to college reflected in the Pew report was attributable almost entirely to increased community-college enrollment. About 3.4 million, or 11.8 percent, of young adults were enrolled at community colleges, up from 3.1 million, or 10.9 percent, in 2007.

Enrollment at four-year colleges was essentially flat, at about eight million, or 27.8 percent of young adults, the Pew report said.

College enrollment varies by race and ethnicity. Nearly 41 percent of white 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college in 2008, compared with about 32 percent of black young adults and 26 percent of Hispanics in that age group.

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